

The “Ponsonby Britt” solution: challenges in audiovisual cataloging practices

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Never let it be said that cataloging is an activity bereft of creativity or ingenuity. When one catalogs anything, particularly a non-traditional asset apart from the monographs librarians are usually assumed to work with by default, one imbues it with definition and meaning, essentially giving it a life and findability beyond its existence as an object, an asset, or an electronic entity. The cataloger, in essence, uses a record to create a sense of place and purpose for an item and for the institution which collects it. I personally came to understand these principles during my time as a cataloger for The Paley Center for Media in New York from 2010 to 2016.

The Paley Center is a unique organization, a combination library/museum dedicated to preserving the entire continuum of broadcast media throughout the years, primarily television, radio, and internet-based items. My time there began in 2009, when I was doing research for my undergraduate thesis on “The Twilight Zone” and the nature of its narrative techniques. The collection is one of incredible diversity, comprising material both contemporary and historical, dating back to the beginning of modern broadcast media. I took up an internship there and started full-time work in the summer of 2010. At the time, I had no especial affinity for Library Science (indeed, I had no idea that “Library Science” was even a term or what it entailed) and was not interested in pursuing it as a career. I knew something about early television history, but I was certainly no expert, which made the transition into cataloging audiovisual records a slow and at times laborious one.

The Paley Center employs a unique classification system unrooted to any particular previous standard, save perhaps for some old Library of Congress classification principles. Its listing of genre categorizations reveals something of the place’s history and attitude towards its collection; it was last updated in 2003, when “Reality” was added as a genre. There are a number of peculiarities about the listings: “Drama,” for example, has numerous subdivisions such as “Drama - Western,” “Drama - Medical,” etc., but there is no equivalent granularity for “Comedy” or “Animation”, each of which had essentially a single category. As a lifelong science-fiction aficionado, I was somewhat dismayed to learn that the genre was listed as “Drama - Fantasy/Science-Fiction”, which, for example, made cataloging comedic science-fiction programs somewhat imprecise. I recall advocating on several occasions for more nuanced genre listings, but I wasn’t able to garner much support for the notion from the higher-ups.

One thing that I learned over my years there is that cataloging is often like detective work. The answers all exist somewhere, but more often than not they are scattered about and require patience and lateral thinking to assemble properly. Certainly the internet can be a quick resource for more familiar ground. “Cheers,” “All in the Family,” “The Brady Bunch,” all these are well-documented, perhaps in some cases over-documented. But what about a special on children’s folk tales that was broadcast once circa 1984 on an unidentified public access station in Massachusetts somewhere? IMDb provides no support, and neither does the Paley Center’s collection of TV Guide magazine (robust though it is, dating back to the 1940’s and tremendously useful in determining airdates and air times for older programs). Even familiar ground can provide challenges: for example, in attempting to catalog “The Running Man,” the 1987 Schwarzenegger film, I first had to determine what particular version I was watching, in this case the version first edited for television broadcast (judging from the distinct overdubbing of expletives). I then had to determine its initial broadcast date, something not easily gleaned from online resources. The end solution revealed itself indirectly in the form of an entry on eBay soliciting the sale of a newspaper photograph of Schwarzenegger taken to promote the broadcast, which upon dating was cross-referenced with the TV Guide listings, thus revealing the sought-after date (which if I recall correctly was sometime around September 12th, 1994). What of other offerings, such as an obscure 1962 unaired sitcom pilot written by Woody Allen, “The Laughmakers”? Somewhat sheepishly, I found myself reading up on contextual information about the broadcast from a blog post written by a visitor to the Los Angeles branch of the Paley Center, a sort of recursive information-gathering endeavor on my part!

Perhaps the most involved aspect of the job, one which I have yet to find an equivalent for in other library professions, is the level of descriptive text required for each entry. Each asset necessitated the creation of a detailed synopsis recounting the majority of its content and its general tone (incidentally, this included any and all commercials or promos, which had its own particular methodology). Some descriptive text was easier to define than others. If, for example, two characters in a story engaged in a fistfight, usually a simple “they have a fistfight” would suffice. Other situations required more in the way of context; the nature of fiction and entertainment is such that it can assume much of its viewer or end-user, and thus creates a framework of reality which is accessible only if apprised of its relation to previous entries. Synopses at the Paley Center are written in the present tense, and are written so as to assume that the reader (or viewer) possesses all required knowledge of the scenario, whether presented in the material itself or having been already delineated in a previous installment, part, or similar segment. The nature of long-running television series can therefore necessitate a great deal of additional “legwork” for a cataloger interested in matters of completeness and comprehensibility. One can imagine my confusion upon being “parachuted in” to an episode of a long-running series I had no previous knowledge of and which possesses its own internal complexities of plot and character. “X-Files” and “The Wire” come to mind, as well as intergenerational perennials like “Doctor Who” or “Dynasty”.

A constant source of frustration lay in the interaction between curators and catalogers. The Paley Center could be described as both a museum and a library, and in many regards these functions did not necessarily overlap. Collectively, “the curators” became something of an unseen bogeyman for the cataloging staff, voicing directives and classifications without edification or the chance for discourse between departments. For example, the so-called Hispanic-American Collection, one of several groupings of assets designed to showcase various ethnic or minority groups in media, included a number of selections only tangentially related to its ostensible subject matter. The television programs featuring one or two Hispanic or Hispanic-adjacent actors might be acceptable, but what of the two documentaries about Brazil I was asked to catalog (perhaps they should have classified it as a “Latin American Collection”). This was perhaps exacerbated by some peculiarities of the old database: special text characters, such as “ñ” or “á” simply did not display properly, and so were either avoided by catalogers or were rendered as an unintelligible pidgin in the newer version post-transfer.

I found myself questioning some of the collection cultivation aspects of the curatorial staff’s decisions, as we catalogers had no explicit sense of the sociological or moral particulars of the collections’ goals. Did any of the collections, LGTB, African-American, Hispanic-American, etc. have any stipulations about how their particular focus groups should be portrayed? Or how prominent such people are within the bodies of the work? My own sensibilities, for example, wouldn’t make any argument against the inclusion of programs like “Looking” or “Brothers” (the 1984-1989 series) in the LGBT collection, but what about “Desperate Housewives”? What about the (in my opinion execrable) “Drew Carey Show,” with its crude and rather tasteless occasional forays into homosexual characterization? Historical significance no doubt played some part, such as selections from “All That Glitters,” an obscure Norman Lear vehicle featuring a supporting role from Linda Gray portraying what was touted as television’s first transsexual character (handled, I might add, with a level of cluelessness such as to render its portrayal almost piteous in its ineptitude).

However, often the problem was the opposite: the catalogers were left to their own devices to formulate judgment calls about a particular work, and in doing so classify, reclassify, and potentially define it for a larger audience. Again, genre headings proved to be something of a murky area in this regard. “Comedy” and “Drama” are on the surface fairly straightforward delimiters, mutually exclusive and generally obeying their own principles and particular tropes. Modern television programs, however, often harbor aspirations of blurring genre conventions in an assumption of a more “inclusive” presentation to audiences, perhaps exhausted by more “conventional” or rigid appellations. Hence the creation of more or less dubious portmanteaus: “dramedy,” “tragicomedy,” “rom-com,” and so on. Regardless of their actual content, such material resists easy categorization. Is it a drama with comedic elements? A comedy with dramatic interludes? A medical drama with fantastic elements that also happens to be a western (I’m looking at you, “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman”)? These are the sorts of considerations one must get accustomed to while cataloging such entries. My strategy, which I imagine is fairly typical of such endeavors, was to isolate the main thrust of whatever the item was, and to distill it down to its most core elements. Is the material generally serious but with some sprinklings of levity? “Drama.” Is it meant to induce laughter (successfully or otherwise)? “Comedy.” And so on.

And as with all cataloging positions, some issues were, to put it in very technical Library Science terms, “just plain weird.” For example, the cataloging conventions of the Paley Center do not allow catalogers to list animals in the production credits (or editors, for that matter, but that is a non-strange complaint); nowhere will you find Lassie, Flipper, Mr. Ed, or other stars such as them listed as official parts of the production information. However, the Paley Center does make allowances for people who do not exist. Take the bizarre example I discovered in “The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.” Careful attention to the credit sequence for that program reveals that the executive producer was one “Ponsonby Britt.” Ponsonby Britt is in fact a fictional individual created by the show’s actual producer, Jay Ward. Apparently the network demanded that his cartoon required an executive producer on staff, and to placate them he simply made one up. Upon bringing this to the attention of the head cataloger, he was momentarily perplexed before allowing me to formalize such a credit; it made clear to me the notion that cataloging truly cannot be anything except a case-by-case sort of enterprise. More strangeness arose out of the Paley Center’s joint project with the International Olympic Committee to catalog a massive backlog of Olympics footage dating back to the 1950’s. These entries required their own particular language and cataloging standards apart even from the Paley Center’s own usual practices. It necessitated the absorption of (to me) arcane and mysterious sports terminology. How else was I to determine whether a rowing event was “eight with coxswain” or “eight without coxswain” or other such appellations? Or how to assign proper country name abbreviations to the various competitors in the Cold War-era 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles (was it still East Germany then? I don’t recall anymore).

In conclusion, I would say that the vicissitudes of cataloging in a modern age necessitate their own particular schemas of thought and perhaps a reevaluation of the principles in which they are valued. We owe it to the “Cagney & Lacey”s of this world, to the “Defenders,” the “Twilight Zone”s, the “Tomorrow Show”s, the “Seinfeld”s, the “Dynasty”s. We owe it to the infinite and ever-changing varieties of media created and consumed every day, and the ways in which we thereby disseminate knowledge and entertainment to each other. Thus, the cataloger must be as multifarious and adaptable as the material they seek to categorize.

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